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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

11 June 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Colombia: The Nature of the Political Danger

SUMMARY

The National Front -- a system of coalition government that has provided political stability in Colombia since its inception in 1958 -- has all but broken down. Even if it manages to survive over the next year, it will probably be unable to relieve the country's mounting economic and political tensions. At present the Front is under extreme pressure from labor, business and military leaders to undertake effective measures to deal with the worsening economic situation, but it is unlikely to move either decisively or successfully.

An early disintegration or overthrow of the Front would bring on a period of political confusion and possibly major disorders, but we believe that the chances of a successful extremist revolution would be small. On the other hand, the indefinite prolongation of the present ineffectual system would eventually strengthen the hand of the advocates of violent revolution.

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GROUP 1  
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1. Colombia's political history has been dominated by the intense and often violent rivalry between its traditional parties -- the Conservatives and the Liberals. In 1957-1958, following a decade of virtual civil war and military rule, the leaders of the two parties devised a scheme known as the "National Front" and wrote it into the country's constitution. Their purpose was to compose their sectarian differences and restore both political peace and civilian oligarchical control. The Front provides for the alternation of the presidency between the two parties and equal division of all other elective and appointive offices. The essential feature of the system is its requirement for two-thirds majorities on all important legislative matters. This is intended to prevent any combination of political forces from imposing its will on a sizeable section of either party: in effect, it gives each major political faction a virtual veto over policy.

2. The Front worked reasonably well at first, providing not only political stability but also some useful initiatives for stepping up economic development and social reform. These led to the labelling of Colombia as the "showcase" of the Alliance for Progress. But the system has rarely worked well in recent years. Economic growth has slowed down and social reform programs

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have dragged along in low gear: if anything, the poor in Colombia are both more numerous and more dissatisfied today than they were several years ago.

3. For the past year, moreover, the Front has been unable even to address itself on a sustained basis to the country's problems, much less to alleviate them. Conservative Guillermo Leon Valencia, President since 1962, has not exerted the leadership required by so cumbersome a governmental system. Popular dissatisfaction with living conditions led to a setback for the Front in the 1964 elections which reduced it in the House of Representatives to a thin margin over the two-thirds majority needed to do business. Most important, ever since the election the nominal supporters of the Front have been engaged in bitter infighting for political position for the 1966 congressional and presidential contests.

4. Popular discontent came to a head last January in a call by democratic labor leaders for a general strike that was averted only when Valencia promised to convene a special session of Congress to do something about the worsening economic situation. Congress has been in session since April; in the meantime, business leaders, and even the usually apolitical military, have joined labor in demanding that the government come up with an effective

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program. But the various elements of the National Front so far have spent most of their time attacking each other rather than the work at hand. The Front may yet come up with some kind of economic program. The measures that are most needed, however, are certain to be unpopular, at least initially. Thus growing inflationary pressures can be relieved only by increased taxes and by restraints on prices and wages. Intense pressures on Colombia's balance of payments require either an adjustment of the overvalued exchange rate or more stringent trade control. Also, if poorly handled, a devaluation would greatly increase inflationary pressures.

5. We believe that the National Front will probably fail to take decisive corrective measures regarding the present economic crisis. Indeed, in our view, the National Front has all but broken down; as presently constituted, it probably is already beyond durable repair. The Front might be able to hold on until the congressional elections next March, but it will probably be unable to relieve the country's problems sufficiently to impress the electorate. Consequently, anti-Front forces would probably gain at least the one-third margin in Congress which would enable them on their own, to hamstring the government for still another two-year period.

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6. If the National Front were to disintegrate in the near future, what would ensue? We believe it most likely that the military would move either to establish a military junta or to dictate the terms for an interim civilian alternative to the National Front. The political reaction to the military intervention would probably depend on such factors as the extent of intra-Front quarrelling at the time and on whether large-scale public disorders were taking place or appeared imminent. We think there is about an even chance that the great bulk of political leaders would accept the intervention, welcoming the opportunity to try to establish a more effective governmental system. Under such circumstances, the period of confusion and uncertainty surrounding the collapse of the Front would probably be relatively short. But we believe it equally likely that a sufficient number of politicians -- perhaps including President Valencia -- would try to resist any military intervention, thereby increasing the prospects that the period of political confusion would be prolonged.

7. The military probably would not move unless there had been some degree of public disorder. The coup itself would raise the possibility of major disorders, either provoked or prolonged

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by extremist groups. We believe, nonetheless, that the chances for a successful Communist revolution would be small. The extreme left in Colombia is badly fractured, poorly led, and not very popular. The orthodox Communist Party (PCC), the largest leftist extremist group, has so far shown little interest in violent tactics and would probably shy away from a direct confrontation with the military unless circumstances appeared extremely favorable. Several extremist splinter groups have engaged in largely ineffectual "armed struggle" against the government (i.e., sporadic urban bombings and at least one hit-and-run guerrilla raid against a small village), but these tactics have apparently not evoked a favorable response from the population.

8. Ex-dictator Rojas Pinilla, on the other hand, has been drawing large, enthusiastic crowds to his demagogic rallies against the National Front. Rojas, who is as hostile toward the oligarchy as any leftist, is probably more interested in testing his strength in elections than in street riots. If a military coup did not exclude the possibility of elections in the near term, he would probably not directly oppose it.

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9. In the event of a military coup, the Colombian security forces would almost certainly resist any extremist uprising and would probably be able to maintain control of outbreaks of violence in major cities. Their ability to keep order throughout the rural areas would be more limited, but once order had been established in urban areas they would probably be able in time to pacify outstanding rural troublespots.

10. The replacement of one governmental system by another would not in itself solve any of Colombia's problems. But the indefinite prolongation of the present ineffectual system would over time only add to the country's problems and would eventually increase the appeal of the advocates of violent social revolution.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



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SHERMAN KENT  
Chairman

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Remarks:

This Memorandum gives our appreciation of the basic elements in the Colombian situation. It is sent to you against the possibility that the current crisis in that country may require your attention during the next few days.

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Sherman Kent	11 Jun 65
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